

Local Forces Who Defeated ISIS in Syria Defend Their Territory

The outcry against Trump's decision to withdraw troops from Syria reveals an appetite for regional hegemony, writes As'ad AbuKhalil. It also minimizes the capacity of native militia to defend territory for which they fought and died.

A Wise and Rare Decision

By [As'ad AbuKhalil](#)

Special to Consortium News



President Donald Trump's announcement that he will withdraw 2000 U.S. troops from Syria has caused great alarm in elite circles. [The New York Times](#) and [The Washington Post](#) both warned it would leave Israel "abandoned" and "isolated" and would embolden enemies of the U.S. Martin Indyk, a former Mideast envoy for Democratic administrations, [complained](#) that Trump did not factor in the national security interests of Israel.

Hillary Clinton, the former secretary of state who lost the presidency to Trump, tweeted: "Actions have consequences, and whether we're in Syria or not, the people who want to harm us are there & at war. Isolationism is weakness. Empowering ISIS is dangerous. Playing into Russia & Iran's hands is foolish. This President is putting our national security at grave risk."

Hollywood celebrities have also [jumped into](#) the act.

The strong reaction to Trump's decision (which fulfills a

campaign promise to disengage militarily from the Middle East) highlights his gap with a mainstream media and foreign policy establishment that supports a more aggressive U.S. military intervention in the Middle East. The only time these detractors ever strongly supported Trump was when he ordered the bombing of Syria. Establishment spokesman Farid Zakaria, a favored CNN host and pundit, said Trump had finally become “presidential.” The only reservation was that the bombing should have been more massive.

The latest [civilian death toll in Syria](#) is over 107,000. The media has, by and large, disregarded the extent to which U.S. bombs have contributed to this enormous loss of life. When the history of the Syrian war is written, it is very likely that the destruction of Raqqa will be categorized as a U.S. war crime—to be added to the many war crimes committed by all sides in the protracted war.

Exaggerations of US Role

The outcry against Trump’s withdrawal announcement include exaggerations of the role that 2000 U.S. troops played in defeating ISIS (which exclude personnel involved in covert actions).

[In a Tweet](#), Rukmini Callimachi of *The New York Times* oddly attributed the loss of 99 percent of ISIS territory in Syria and Iraq to the work of the U.S.-led “coalition” (so broadly defined to include Sweden and Bahrain among others). This estimate typically ignores the contributions and sacrifices of native Syrian, Lebanese and Iraqi fighters, many of whom are foes of the U.S.

While it can’t be determined mathematically the extent to

which the U.S. and others contributed to the demise of ISIS, it is certain that the bulk of the fighting against ISIS—and the dying—was done by locals, the majority of whom opposed the U.S.

This was the case in Lebanon, where the fight against ISIS and al-Qaida, over the last two years, was carried out almost single-handedly by Hizbullah, which the U.S. State Department designates a terrorist organization. Similarly, Russia and its allies in Syria did most of the fighting against ISIS despite the contributions of pro-U.S. Kurdish militias and some rebel groups.

The economic power of ISIS—in terms of the oil trade—was largely destroyed by Russian, not U.S., bombing. In Iraq, the virtual collapse of the U.S.-trained Iraqi Army in June 2014, when Mosul was overrun, was a major factor in the rise of ISIS in Iraq and Syria and beyond.

In Iraq, the process of mobilization and recruitment against ISIS began with the formation of Hashd, or “mass,” militias formed at the behest of [Ayatollah Sistani](#), the senior Iranian Shia cleric based in Iraq. [Qasem Soleimani](#), commander of the [Quds Force](#) of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards became directly involved. While these natives fought back and destroyed ISIS in Iraq the U.S. provided air cover. Locals did the fighting and the dying.

Trump’s agenda poses a danger to the U.S. and the world. But the global agenda of the Democratic and Republican (establishment) is even more dangerous. It would expand wars in the Middle East and beyond. It would intensify U.S. enmities to places such as Russia, China, North Korea and

Iran and abort any attempts at reconciliation. It would prevent the U.S. from leaving a military occupation. It would challenge the enemies of the U.S. and Israel with direct U.S. military projection of force throughout the Middle East.

Presidents Obey the Military

Trump's fault, in the eyes of those who criticize his decision to withdraw troops from Syria, is that he did not follow the advice of his military. The notion that a president must follow military orders is entirely undemocratic. But since Sept. 11, 2001, it has been established—especially by Democrats—that the commander in chief should do just that. Thus, President Barack Obama went against his own views and agreed to expand the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan.

Due to its strong popular support, the U.S. military often operates outside the reach of congressional supervision or public accountability. By occasionally challenging the generals, as with this decision to withdraw troops from Syria and Afghanistan, Trump has proven more politically courageous than Obama, who was afraid to defy the brass. (While Obama resisted his own foreign policy advisors' pressures to intervene more deeply in Syria, the U.S. military at that time was less enthusiastic about intervention.)

Israel was clearly unhappy with Trump's announcement of troop withdrawal from Syria, although Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was one of the few world leaders briefed by Trump before announcing his decision. (Is there a matter

of any significance over which the U.S. president—whether Bush or Obama or Trump—does not brief Netanyahu?)

To satisfy Israel, the U.S. must deploy troops in all Arab countries and to join Israel in its unending wars against the whole Arab world. (Paradoxically, Israel is loathed by the Arab people while cruel Arab despots in the Gulf—such as those leading Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, UAE and Qatar—race to establish relations with Israel and often try to ingratiate themselves with the U.S. president and Congress.)

Israel, through its powerful lobby, has been agitating for the U.S. to wage war on Iran, Syria, Hizbullah and the Palestinian territories. And Western media—no matter how much Israel accumulates by way of its massive arsenal of WMDs, and no matter how much Israeli gives itself the right to bomb at will in Syria and Palestine—still treats Israel as a vulnerable entity in need of permanent U.S. military protection.

All of this explains why Clinton is more popular than Trump. She had promised more military hegemony in the Middle East. And she was just as enthusiastic as Trump about propping up Middle East despots. For instance, as secretary of state, Clinton supported Egyptian dictator Husni Mubarak at all costs. When Mubarak fell she wanted the head of the secret police, Omar Suleiman, to be his successor.

The underlying causes for U.S. withdrawals from Syria can't be known and some wager it won't pan out. But it is unlikely that it's part of a large geo-strategic scheme on Trump's part. Nor is the move likely to predict a U.S. strike on Iran. After two years in office, Trump is showing more self-

confidence in his foreign policy decisions than when he started. It is likely that he will follow his original isolationist instincts. Those instincts are at odds with the bipartisan consensus in D.C., which has heaped an avalanche of criticism upon one of the rare wise decisions of an often rash president.

ISIS is indeed on the run, and it has lost the bulk of its territorial base. It retains some fighters in its remnants in Eastern Syria, but its ability to expand is drastically limited. The major enemies of ISIS—those who drove ISIS from most of its territory—remain on the ground in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon. While overlooked by Western reporters and columnists, they are ready to go to war again to fight back an ISIS offensive.

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Iraq +15: Accumulated Evil of the Whole

Brushing aside warnings that he was about to unleash Armageddon in the Middle East, George W. Bush launched an unprovoked attack on Iraq on March 19-20, 2003, the ramifications of which we are still grappling with today, Nat Parry writes.

By Nat Parry

Robert Jackson, the Chief United States Prosecutor at the Nuremberg Trials of Nazi war criminals, once denounced aggressive war as “the greatest menace of our time.” With much of Europe laying in smoldering ruin, he said in 1945 that “to initiate a war of aggression ... is not only an international crime: it is the supreme international crime differing only from other war crimes in that it contains within itself the accumulated evil of whole.”

When it comes to the U.S. invasion of Iraq 15 years ago today, the accumulated evil of the whole is difficult to fully comprehend. Estimates of the war’s costs vary, but commonly cited figures put the financial cost for U.S. taxpayers at upwards of a trillion dollars, the cost in Iraqi lives in the hundreds of thousands, and U.S. soldier deaths at nearly 5,000. Another 100,000 Americans have been wounded and four million Iraqis driven from their homes as refugees.

As staggering as those numbers may be, they don’t come close to describing the true cost of the war, or the magnitude of the crime that was committed by launching it on March 19-20, 2003. Besides the cost in blood and treasure, the cost to basic principles of international justice, long-term geopolitical stability, and the impacts on the U.S. political system are equally profound.

Lessons Learned and Forgotten

Although for a time, it seemed that the lessons of the war were widely understood and had tangible effects on American politics – with Democrats, for example, taking control of Congress in the midterm elections of 2006 based primarily on growing antiwar sentiment around the country and Barack Obama defeating Hillary Clinton in the 2008 primaries based largely on the two candidates’ opposing views on the Iraq War – the political establishment has, since then, effectively swept these lessons under the rug.

One of those lessons, of course, was that proclamations of the intelligence community should be treated with huge grain of salt. In the build-up to war with Iraq a decade and a half ago, there were those who pushed back on the politicized and “cherry-picked” intelligence that the Bush administration was using to convince the American people of the need to go to war, but for the most

part, the media and political establishment parroted these claims without showing the due diligence of independently confirming the claims or even applying basic principles of logic.

For example, even as United Nations weapons inspectors, led by Swedish diplomat Hans Blix, were coming up empty-handed when acting on tips from the U.S. intelligence community, few within the mainstream media were willing to draw the logical conclusion that the intelligence was wrong (or that the Bush administration was lying). Instead, they assumed that the UN inspectors were simply incompetent or that Saddam Hussein was just really good at hiding his weapons of mass destruction.

Yet, despite being misled so thoroughly back in 2002 and 2003, today Americans show the same credulousness to the intelligence community when it claims that “Russia hacked the 2016 election,” without offering proof. Liberals, in particular, have hitched their wagons to the investigation being led by Special Counsel Robert Mueller, who is widely hailed as a paragon of virtue, while the truth is, as FBI Director during the Bush administration, he was a key enabler of the WMD narrative used to launch an illegal war.

Mueller testified to Congress that “Iraq has moved to the top of my list” of threats to the domestic security of the United States. “As we previously briefed this Committee,” Mueller said on February 11, 2003, “Iraq’s WMD program poses a clear threat to our national security.” He warned that Baghdad might provide WMDs to al-Qaeda to carry out a catastrophic attack in the United States.

Mueller drew criticism at the time, including from FBI whistleblower Coleen Rowley, for conflating Iraq and al-Qaeda, with demands that the FBI produce whatever evidence it had on this supposed connection.

Today, of course, Mueller is celebrated by Democrats as the best hope for bringing down the presidency of Donald Trump. George W. Bush has also enjoyed a revival of his image thanks largely to his public criticisms of Trump, with a majority of Democrats now viewing the 43rd president favorably. Many Democrats have also embraced aggressive war – often couched in the rhetoric of “humanitarian interventionism” – as their preferred option to deal with foreign policy challenges such as the Syrian conflict.

When the Democratic Party chose Clinton as its nominee in 2016, it appeared that Democrats had also embraced her willingness to use military force to achieve “regime change” in countries that are seen as a threat to U.S. interests – whether Iraq, Iran or Syria.

As a senator from New York during the build-up for military action against Iraq,

Clinton not only voted to authorize the U.S. invasion, but fervently supported the war – which she backed with or without UN Security Council authorization. Her speech on the floor of the Senate on Oct. 10, 2002 arguing for military action promoted the same falsehoods that were being used by the Bush administration to build support for the war, claiming for example that Saddam Hussein had “given aid, comfort, and sanctuary to terrorists, including al-Qaeda members.”

“If left unchecked,” she said, “Saddam Hussein will continue to increase his capacity to wage biological and chemical warfare, and will keep trying to develop nuclear weapons. Should he succeed in that endeavor, he could alter the political and security landscape of the Middle East, which as we know all too well affects American security.”

Clinton maintained support for the war even as it became obvious that Iraq in fact had no weapons of mass destruction – the primary casus belli for the war – only cooling her enthusiasm in 2006 when it became clear that the Democratic base had turned decisively against the war and her hawkish position endangered her chances for the 2008 presidential nomination. But eight years later, the Democrats had apparently moved on, and her support for the war was no longer considered a disqualification for the presidency.

One of the lessons that should be recalled today, especially as the U.S. gears up today for possible confrontations with countries including North Korea and Russia, is how easy it was in 2002-2003 for the Bush administration to convince Americans that they were under threat from the regime of Saddam Hussein some 7,000 miles away. The claims about Iraq’s WMDs were untrue, with many saying so in real time – including by the newly formed group Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity, which was regularly issuing memoranda to the president and to the American people debunking the falsehoods that were being promoted by the U.S. intelligence community.

But even if the claims about Iraq’s alleged stockpiles were true, there was still no reason to assume that Saddam Hussein was on the verge of launching a surprise attack against the United States. Indeed, while Americans were all but convinced that Iraq threatened their safety and security, it was actually the U.S. government that was threatening Iraqis.

Far from posing an imminent threat to the United States, in 2003, Iraq was a country that had already been devastated by a U.S.-led war a decade earlier and crippling economic sanctions that caused the deaths of 1.5 million Iraqis (leading to the resignation of two UN humanitarian coordinators who called the sanctions genocidal).

Threats and Bluster

Although the invasion didn't officially begin until March 20, 2003 (still the 19th in Washington), the United States had been explicitly threatening to attack the country as early as January 2003, with the Pentagon publicizing plans for a so-called "shock and awe" bombing campaign.

"If the Pentagon sticks to its current war plan," CBS News reported on January 24, "one day in March the Air Force and Navy will launch between 300 and 400 cruise missiles at targets in Iraq. ... [T]his is more than the number that were launched during the entire 40 days of the first Gulf War. On the second day, the plan calls for launching another 300 to 400 cruise missiles."

A Pentagon official warned: "There will not be a safe place in Baghdad."

These public threats appeared to be a form of intimidation and psychological warfare, and were almost certainly in violation of the UN Charter, which states: "All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations."

The Pentagon's vaunted "shock and awe" attack began with limited bombing on March 19-20, as U.S. forces unsuccessfully attempted to kill Hussein. Attacks continued against a small number of targets until March 21, when the main bombing campaign began. U.S.-led forces launched approximately 1,700 air sorties, with 504 using cruise missiles.

During the invasion, the U.S. also dropped some 10,800 cluster bombs on Iraq despite claiming that only a fraction of that number had been used.

"The Pentagon presented a misleading picture during the war of the extent to which cluster weapons were being used and of the civilian casualties they were causing," reported *USA Today* in late 2003. Despite claims that only 1,500 cluster weapons had been used resulting in just one civilian casualty, "in fact, the United States used 10,782 cluster weapons," including many that were fired into urban areas from late March to early April 2003.

The cluster bombs killed hundreds of Iraqi civilians and left behind thousands of unexploded bomblets that continued to kill and injure civilians weeks after the fighting stopped.

(Because of the indiscriminate effect of these weapons, their use is banned by the international Convention on Cluster Munitions, which the United States has refused to sign.)

Attempting to kill Hussein, Bush ordered the bombing of an Iraqi residential restaurant on April 7. A single B-1B bomber dropped four precision-guided 2,000-pound bombs. The four bunker-penetrating bombs destroyed the target building, the al Saa restaurant block and several surrounding structures, leaving a 60-foot crater and unknown casualties.

Diners, including children, were ripped apart by the bombs. One mother found her daughter's torso and then her severed head. U.S. intelligence later confirmed that Hussein wasn't there.

Resistance and Torture

It was evident within weeks of the initial invasion that the Bush administration had misjudged the critical question of whether Iraqis would fight. They put up stiffer than expected resistance even in southern Iraqi cities such as Umm Qasr, Basra and Nasiriya where Hussein's support was considered weak, and soon after the fall of the regime on April 9, when the Bush administration decided to disband the Iraqi army, it helped spark an anti-U.S. insurgency led by many former Iraqi military figures.

Despite Bush's triumphant May 1 landing on an aircraft carrier and his speech in front of a giant "Mission Accomplished" banner, it looked as though the collapse of the Baathist government had been just the first stage in what would become a long-running war of attrition. After the Iraqi conventional forces had been disbanded, the U.S. military began to notice in May 2003 a steadily increasing flurry of attacks on U.S. occupiers in various regions of the so-called "Sunni Triangle."

These included groups of insurgents firing assault rifles and rocket-propelled grenades at U.S. occupation troops, as well as increasing use of improvised explosive devices on U.S. convoys.

Possibly anticipating a long, drawn-out occupation and counter-insurgency campaign, in a March 2003 memorandum Bush administration lawyers devised legal doctrines to justify certain torture techniques, offering legal rationales "that could render specific conduct, otherwise criminal, not unlawful."

They argued that the president or anyone acting on the president's orders were not bound by U.S. laws or international treaties prohibiting torture, asserting that the need for "obtaining intelligence vital to the protection of untold thousands of American citizens" superseded any obligations the administration had under domestic or international law.

"In order to respect the President's inherent constitutional authority to manage a military campaign," the memo stated, U.S. prohibitions against torture "must

be construed as inapplicable to interrogations undertaken pursuant to his Commander-in-Chief authority.”

Over the course of the next year, disclosures emerged that torture had been used extensively in Iraq for “intelligence gathering.” Investigative journalist Seymour Hersh disclosed in *The New Yorker* in May 2004 that a 53-page classified Army report written by Gen. Antonio Taguba concluded that Abu Ghraib prison’s military police were urged on by intelligence officers seeking to break down the Iraqis before interrogation.

“Numerous incidents of sadistic, blatant and wanton criminal abuses were inflicted on several detainees,” wrote Taguba.

These actions, authorized at the highest levels, constituted serious breaches of international and domestic law, including the Convention Against Torture, the Geneva Convention relative to the treatment of Prisoners of War, as well as the U.S. War Crimes Act and the Torture Statute.

They also may have played a role in the rise of the ISIS terror group, the origins of which were subsequently traced to an American prison in Iraq dubbed Camp Bucca. This camp was the site of rampant abuse of prisoners, one of whom, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, later became the leader of ISIS. Al-Baghdadi spent four years as a prisoner at Bucca, where he started recruiting others to his cause.

America’s Weapons of Mass Destruction

Besides torture and the use of cluster bombs, the crimes against the Iraqi people over the years included wholesale massacres, long-term poisoning and the destruction of cities.

There was the 2004 assault on Fallujah in which white phosphorus – banned under international law – was used against civilians. There was the 2005 Haditha massacre, in which 24 unarmed civilians were systematically murdered by U.S. marines. There was the 2007 “Collateral Murder” massacre revealed by WikiLeaks in 2010, depicting the indiscriminate killing of more than a dozen civilians in the Iraqi suburb of New Baghdad – including two Reuters news staff.

There is also the tragic legacy of cancer and birth defects caused by the U.S. military’s extensive use of depleted uranium and white phosphorus. In Fallujah the use of depleted uranium led to birth defects in infants 14 times higher than in the Japanese cities targeted by U.S. atomic bombs at close of World War II, Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Noting the birth defects in Fallujah, Al Jazeera journalist Dahr Jamail told Democracy Now in 2013:

“And going on to Fallujah, because I wrote about this a year ago, and then I

returned to the city again this trip, we are seeing an absolute crisis of congenital malformations of newborn. ... I mean, these are extremely hard to look at. They're extremely hard to bear witness to. But it's something that we all need to pay attention to, because of the amount of depleted uranium used by the U.S. military during both of their brutal attacks on the city of 2004, as well as other toxic munitions like white phosphorus, among other things."

A report sent to the UN General Assembly by Dr. Nawal Majeed Al-Sammarai, Iraq's Minister of Women's Affairs, stated that in September 2009, Fallujah General Hospital had 170 babies born, 75 percent of whom were deformed. A quarter of them died within their first week of life.

The military's use of depleted uranium also caused a sharp increase in Leukemia and birth defects in the city of Najaf, which saw one of the most severe military actions during the 2003 invasion, with cancer becoming more common than the flu according to local doctors.

By the end of the war, a number of Iraq's major cities, including Fallujah, Ramadi, and Mosul, had been reduced to rubble and by 2014, a former CIA director conceded that the nation of Iraq had basically been destroyed.

"I think Iraq has pretty much ceased to exist," said Michael Hayden, noting that it was fragmented into multiple parts which he didn't see "getting back together." In other words, the United States, using its own extensive arsenal of actual weapons of mass destruction, had completely destroyed a sovereign nation.

Predictable Consequences

The effects of these policies included the predictable growth of Islamic extremism, with a National Intelligence Estimate – representing the consensus view of the 16 spy services inside the U.S. government – warning in 2006 that a whole new generation of Islamic radicalism was being spawned by the U.S. occupation of Iraq. According to one American intelligence official, the consensus was that "the Iraq war has made the overall terrorism problem worse."

The assessment noted that several underlying factors were "fueling the spread of the jihadist movement," including "entrenched grievances, such as corruption, injustice, and fear of Western domination, leading to anger, humiliation, and a sense of powerlessness," and "pervasive anti-U.S. sentiment among most Muslims all of which jihadists exploit."

But rather than leading to substantive changes or reversals in U.S. policies, the strategy agreed upon in Washington seemed to be to double down on the failed policies that had given rise to radical jihadist groups. In fact, instead of withdrawing from Iraq, the U.S. decided to send a surge of 20,000 troops in

2007. This is despite the fact that public opinion was decidedly against the war.

A Newsweek poll in early 2007 found that 68 percent of Americans opposed the surge, and in another poll conducted just after Bush's 2007 State of the Union Address, 64 percent said Congress was not being assertive enough in challenging the Bush administration over its conduct of the war.

An estimated half-million people marched on Washington on Jan. 27, 2007, with messages for the newly sworn in 110th Congress to "Stand up to Bush," urging Congress to cut the war funding with the slogan, "Not one more dollar, not one more death." A growing combativeness was also on display in the antiwar movement with this demonstration marked by hundreds of protesters breaking through police lines and charging Capitol Hill.

Although there were additional large-scale protests a couple months later to mark the sixth anniversary of the invasion, including a march on the Pentagon led by Iraq War veterans, over the next year the antiwar movement's activities steadily declined. While fatigue might explain some of the waning support for mass mobilizations, much of the decline can also surely be explained by the rise of Barack Obama's candidacy. Millions of people channeled their energies into his campaign, including many motivated by a hope that he represented real change from the Bush years.

One of Obama's advantages over Clinton in the Democratic primary was that he had been an early opponent of the Iraq War while she had been one of its most vocal supporters. This led many American voters to believe in 2008 that they had elected someone who might rein in some of the U.S. military adventurism and quickly end U.S. involvement in Iraq. But this wasn't to be the case. The combat mission dragged on well into President Obama's first term.

War, War and More War

After its well-publicized failures in Iraq, the U.S. turned its attention to Libya, overthrowing the government of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011 utilizing armed militias implicated in war crimes and backed with NATO air power. Following Gaddafi's ouster, his caches of weapons ended up being shuttled to rebels in Syria, fueling the civil war there. The Obama administration also took a keen interest in destabilizing the Syrian government and to do so began providing arms that often fell into the hands of extremists.

The CIA trained and armed so-called "moderate" rebel units in Syria, only to watch these groups switch sides by joining forces with Islamist brigades such as ISIS and Al Qaeda's affiliate the Nusra Front. Others surrendered to Sunni

extremist groups with the U.S.-provided weapons presumably ending up in the arsenals of jihadists or sometimes just quit or went missing altogether.

Beyond Syria and Libya, Obama also expanded U.S. military engagements in countries including Yemen, Somalia, Pakistan, and sent a surge of troops to Afghanistan in 2009. And despite belatedly withdrawing U.S. forces from Iraq, with the last U.S. troops finally leaving on December 18, 2011, Obama also presided over a major increase in the use of drone strikes and conventional air wars.

In his first term, Obama dropped 20,000 bombs and missiles, a number that shot up to over 100,000 bombs and missiles dropped in his second term. In 2016, the final year of Obama's presidency, the U.S. dropped nearly three bombs every hour, 24 hours a day.

Obama also had the distinction of becoming the fourth U.S. president in a row to bomb the nation of Iraq. Under criticism for allowing the rise of ISIS in the country, Obama decided to reverse his earlier decision to disengage with Iraq, and in 2014 started bombing the country again. Addressing the American people on Sept. 10, 2014, President Obama said that "ISIL poses a threat to the people of Iraq and Syria, and the broader Middle East including American citizens, personnel and facilities."

"If left unchecked," he continued, "these terrorists could pose a growing threat beyond that region, including to the United States. While we have not yet detected specific plotting against our homeland, ISIL leaders have threatened America and our allies."

Of course, this is precisely the result that many voices of caution had warned about back in 2002 and 2003, when millions of Americans were taking to the streets in protest of the looming invasion of Iraq. And, to be clear, it wasn't just the antiwar left urging restraint – establishment figures and paleoconservatives were also voicing concern.

Retired Gen. Anthony Zinni, for example, who served as a Middle East envoy for George W. Bush, warned in October 2002 that by invading Iraq, "we are about to do something that will ignite a fuse in this region that we will rue the day we ever started." Brent Scowcroft, national security adviser in the first Bush administration, said a strike on Iraq "could unleash an Armageddon in the Middle East."

No matter, Bush was a gut player who had made up his mind, so those warnings were brushed aside and the invasion proceeded.

Campaign 2016

When presidential candidate Donald Trump began slamming Bush for the Iraq War during the Republican primary campaign in 2015 and 2016, calling the decision to invade Iraq a “big fat mistake,” he not only won over some of the antiwar libertarian vote, but also helped solidify his image as a political outsider who “tells it like it is.”

And after Hillary Clinton emerged as the Democratic nominee, with her track record as an enthusiastic backer of virtually all U.S. interventions and an advocate of deeper involvement in countries such as Syria, voters could have been forgiven for getting the impression that the Republican Party was now the antiwar party and the Democrats were the hawks.

As the late Robert Parry observed in June 2016, “Amid the celebrations about picking the first woman as a major party’s presumptive nominee, Democrats appear to have given little thought to the fact that they have abandoned a near half-century standing as the party more skeptical about the use of military force. Clinton is an unabashed war hawk who has shown no inclination to rethink her pro-war attitudes.”

The antiwar faction within the Democratic Party was further marginalized during the Democratic National Convention when chants of “No More War” broke out during former Defense Secretary Leon Panetta’s speech. The Democratic establishment responded with chants of “USA!” to drown out the voices for peace and they even turned the lights out on the antiwar section of the crowd. The message was clear: there is no room for the antiwar movement inside the Democratic Party.

While there were numerous factors that played a role in Trump’s stunning victory over Clinton in November 2016, it is no stretch of the imagination to speculate that one of those factors was lingering antiwar sentiment from the Iraq debacle and other engagements of the U.S. military. Many of those fed up with U.S. military adventurism may have fallen for Trump’s quasi-anti-interventionist rhetoric while others may have opted to vote for an alternative party such as the Libertarians or the Greens, both of which took strong stances against U.S. interventionism.

But despite Trump’s occasional statements questioning the wisdom of committing the military to far-off lands such as Iraq or Afghanistan, he was also an advocate for war crimes such as “taking out [the] families” of suspected terrorists. He urged that the U.S. stop being “politically correct” in its waging of war.

So, ultimately, Americans were confronted with choosing between an unreconstructed regime-changing neoconservative Democratic hawk, and a reluctant interventionist who nevertheless wanted to teach terrorists a lesson by killing

their children. Although ultimately the neocon won the popular vote, the war crimes advocate carried the Electoral College.

Following the election it turned out that Trump was a man of his word when it came to killing children. In one of his first military actions as president, Trump ordered an attack on a village in Yemen on Jan. 29, 2017, which claimed the lives of as many as 23 civilians, including a newborn baby and an eight-year-old girl, Nawar al-Awlaki.

Nawar was the daughter of the al-Qaeda propagandist and American citizen Anwar al-Awlaki, who was killed in a September 2011 U.S. drone strike in Yemen.

Normalized Aggression

2017, Trump's first year in office, turned out to be the deadliest year for civilians in Iraq and Syria since U.S. airstrikes began on the two countries in 2014. The U.S. killed between 3,923 and 6,102 civilians during the year, according to a tally by the monitoring group Airwars. "Non-combatant deaths from Coalition air and artillery strikes rose by more than 200 per cent compared to 2016," Airwars noted.

While this spike in civilian deaths did make some headlines, including in the *Washington Post*, for the most part, the thousands of innocents killed by U.S. airstrikes are dismissed as "collateral damage." The ongoing carnage is considered perfectly normal, barely even eliciting a comment from the pundit class.

This is arguably one of the most enduring legacies of the 2003 invasion of Iraq – an act of military aggression that was based on false pretenses, which brushed aside warnings of caution, and blatantly violated international law. With no one in the media or the Bush administration ever held accountable for promoting this war or for launching it, what we have seen is the normalization of military aggression to a level that would have been unimaginable 20 years ago.

Indeed, I remember well the bombing of Iraq that took place in 1998 as part of Bill Clinton's Operation Desert Fox. Although this was a very limited bombing campaign, lasting only four days, there were sizable protests in opposition to the military action. I joined a picket of a couple hundred people in front of the White House holding a hand-made sign reading "IMPEACH HIM FOR WAR CRIMES" – a reference to the fact that Congress was at the time impeaching him for lying about a blowjob.

Compare that to what we see today – or, more accurately what we don't see today – in regards to antiwar advocacy. Despite the fact that the U.S. is now engaged in at least seven military conflicts, there is little in the way of peace

activism or even much of a national debate over the wisdom, legality or morality of waging war. Few even raise objections to its significant financial cost to U.S. taxpayers, for example the fact that one day of spending on these wars amounts to about \$200 million.

Fifteen years ago, one of the arguments of the antiwar movement was that the war on terror was morphing into a perpetual war without boundaries, without rules, and without any end game. The U.S., in other words, was in danger of finding itself in a state of endless war.

We are now clearly embroiled in that endless war, which is a reality that even Senate war hawk Lindsey Graham acknowledged last year when four U.S. troops were killed in Niger. Claiming that he didn't know that the U.S. had a military presence in Niger, Graham – who chairs the Senate Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs – stated that “this is an endless war without boundaries, no limitation on time or geography.”

Although it wasn't clear whether he was lamenting or celebrating this endless and borderless war, his words should be taken as a warning of where the U.S. stands on this 15th anniversary of the U.S. invasion of Iraq – in a war without end, without boundaries, without limits on time or geography.

Resisting Calls to ‘Do Something’ About Syria

A common refrain is that the West must “do something” to help Syria, but this is like arguing that the gasoline that was used to start a fire can also be used to extinguish it, explains Caitlin Johnstone.

By Caitlin Johnstone

“We’ve got to do something about Syria!” goes the common Western refrain.

Actually, no you don't.

“What? You’re saying we should just do nothing??” goes the common response.

Yes. Yeah that'd be great. Definitely please get as far away from Syria as possible, thanks.

Arguing that the Western war machine is a good way to bring about peace and justice is like arguing that a bulldozer is a useful tool for brain surgery.

Arguing that the Western war machine is a good way to bring about peace and justice in Syria is like arguing that the gasoline which was used to start a house fire can also be used to extinguish it.

The cutesy fairy tale you will hear from empire loyalists is that what started out as peaceful protests slowly morphed into a battle between the Syrian government and various terrorist factions, with the West only backing the terrorists later on in the conflict. This is false.

Last October, former Qatari Prime Minister Hamad bin Jassim bin Jaber al-Thani admitted on television that the U.S. and its allies were actively involved in shipping weapons to violent extremist groups in Syria from the very beginning of the war there in 2011. In an article titled "The day before Deraa," the American *Herald Tribune's* Steven Sahiounie documents how CIA-backed foreign mercenaries/terrorists were already in place ready to go prior to the outbreak of violence in Deraa in March 2011. It is now an openly admitted fact that the CIA and U.S. allies have been arming known terrorist factions in Syria. If you know anything about the CIA and the Western war machine, none of this will surprise you.

The violence in Syria that you see today is the direct result of a deliberate and ongoing destabilization campaign by the Western empire against a nation it has had marked for regime change for a very long time. The war machine that ignited this fire is working to manufacture public support for hosing it down with gasoline.

I am not an isolationist. I do not oppose NATO interventionism in Syria from any kind of right-wing paleocon perspective that nation-building and interventionist wars ought to be avoided because they are expensive and create refugee crises. I oppose US-led regime change interventionism in Syria because the empire started the Syrian war and is now using lies and propaganda to manufacture support for additional use of military force with the goal of preventing Syria and its allies from restoring stability to the nation. These hand-wringing "won't someone think of the children" intervention advocates are calling for even more killing and destruction by the very empire which ignited and perpetuated the killing and destruction in the first place.

If you ever want to make sure you're on the correct side of history regarding foreign policy, just look at what the neocon think tanks and liberal interventionists are advocating, and then advocate the exact opposite. U.S.-led regime change interventionism *always* makes things worse, *never* accomplishes what its proponents claim it will accomplish, and inflicts additional death and suffering upon innocent people in a way that *always* benefits the rich and powerful of the Western empire. And when the intervention fails to unfold as its

proponents promised, as it literally *always does*, they say “mistakes were made” and blame it on the mismanagement of whomever happened to be in charge at the time.

It’s a brilliant scheme, really. All these predators needed to do was secure the congressional Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Terrorists in the wake of the September 11 attacks, and now the U.S.-centralized empire can set up permanent military encampments in any strategic location by simply flooding the area with terrorists. This is exactly what it did in Syria, and now the U.S. has a permanent military presence there with the stated goal of effecting regime change.

This has never been about “saving children” – this is about money, power, and resources, which are all of course ultimately the same thing as far as the empire is concerned. Longtime U.S. rival Russia has recently been awarded exclusive rights to oil and gas production in Syria in return for its efforts in helping its longtime ally stop the regime change, a predictable step in the fight for fossil fuel dominance in the region.

Syria’s border dispute with Israel over the Golan Heights means that Israel has every reason to want to keep Syria destabilized, not only because the Golan Heights contains oil but because it provides a third of Israel’s water supply. Bashar al-Assad also launched what he called his “Five Seas Vision” in 2004, a strategy to use Syria’s supreme geographic location to become an economic superpower. Such a plan wouldn’t sit well with the U.S. hegemon, which can only maintain its dominance by keeping other nations down.

“Once the economic space between Syria, Turkey, Iraq and Iran becomes integrated, linking the Mediterranean, the Caspian Sea, the Black Sea and the Arabian Gulf, will not only be important in the Middle East,” Assad once famously said in 2009. “When these seas are connected, we will become the inevitable intersection of the whole world in investment, transportation, and more.”

It’s not hard to imagine how the imperialists would suddenly accelerate the urgency of removing Assad once he began speaking like that. Go try and find anything damning about Bashar al-Assad in the Western mainstream media prior to 2009. You’ll find a bunch of positive expressions, including a nomination for honorary knighthood in 2002 by British Prime Minister Tony Blair. Interesting how he then suddenly transformed overnight into a bloodthirsty sexual sadist who gets off on gassing children to death for no reason.

Every time there’s a crucial conflict unfolding in Syria where the government is trying to fight the violent extremists the empire inflicted upon that nation, we

are saturated in propaganda about how much Assad loves murdering children. At the end of 2016 it was Aleppo, about which we were lied to extensively. Now it is Eastern Ghouta, about which you'll see establishment loyalists from The Guardian and Mother Jones attacking anyone who expresses any skepticism of establishment narratives while cranking out articles with titles like "Waiting for Putin and Assad to run out of people to kill. Is that our plan?"

Rank-and-file victims of western mass media psyops believe that the west ought to "do something" in Syria because someone needs to rescue those poor children, but the reality is that their own government is responsible for creating and perpetuating that violence and they only believe what they believe about Syria because the oligarchs can't come right out and say "We need to keep that region destabilized or effect regime change in order to secure resource control and geopolitical dominance over our rivals." They make it about rescuing children because the truth would make any decent person fall to their knees vomiting.

Be very clear what you are demanding when you say "we need to do something" about Syria. You are not saying we need to go in and hug children and hold umbrellas over the heads of civilians to make sure that they don't get hit by explosives in the crossfire. You are saying we need to go in there and kill anyone who gets in the way, kill Syrian soldiers, kill Assad, and take control of the nation in a way that will benefit nobody but a few wealthy elites, all while causing even worse civilian casualties than are currently being experienced because that's what war does. That's what your cutesy little "we must do something to save the children" sentiment is calling for.

Acknowledging this doesn't make you an "Assadist" or a "Putin puppet" or a crazy conspiracy theorist, it makes you a normal, healthy human being. The western war machine has an extensive history of using lies, false flags and propaganda to manufacture support for lucrative military interventions, and it is undoubtedly lying to us about Syria today. The only just outcome in this conflict is to allow the Syrian government and its allies to restore stability to the region and undo the damage that the West has done.

The fact that the U.S. and its allies are now openly admitting to having armed known terrorist factions in Syria and are still somehow asking you to trust them should elicit nothing other than a full belly laugh right in their face. Anyone in a NATO-allied country saying "we need to do something in Syria" should receive the same instant recoil as a known child rapist asking you to let him babysit your kids. No, Western empire, you do not need to "do something" in Syria.

You need to get the fuck out and stay out.

Caitlin Johnstone is a rogue journalist, poet, and utopia prepper who publishes regularly at [Medium](#). Follow her work on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), or her [website](#). She has a [podcast](#) and a new book [Woke: A Field Guide for Utopia Preppers](#). This article was re-published with permission.

Selective Outrage Undermines Human Rights in Syria

Exclusive: Selective outrage over civilian suffering in Syria – hyping Syrian government abuses while downplaying the effects of U.S.-led Coalition air strikes – undermines the legitimacy of human rights advocacy, argues Jonathan Marshall.

By Jonathan Marshall

Few things threaten the legitimacy of human rights advocacy more than partisans invoking it selectively to promote one side in a violent conflict. That's why people with genuine concern over the plight of war victims should be disturbed by the latest pumped-up campaign of selective outrage over the Syrian government's bombing of Eastern Ghouta, a suburb of Damascus.

That bombing has unquestionably been savage, and arguably even criminal. It should be condemned in no uncertain terms. But it does a grave disservice to the nearly half million people killed over the course of Syria's civil war to single out the tragic killing of more than 300 civilians in that suburb as especially remarkable. Indeed, it betrays a political agenda aimed more at punishing the Damascus government than saving innocent lives.

News stories are [full of quotes](#) painting the situation as nearly unprecedented in its horror: "hell on earth," "never seen anything like this," "one of the worst attacks in Syrian history," and "[flagrant war crime](#)" on an "[epic scale](#)." A *New York Times* editorial, calling the battle "one of the most violent episodes of the seven-year war," [demands](#) that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Russian leaders be [tried for war crimes](#). And a columnist for *The Guardian* says "Eastern Ghouta is turning into Syria's Srebrenica," the Bosnian enclave where thousands of Muslims were killed by Serbian forces in 1995.

Anyone who tries to correct the record risks being misinterpreted as trying to minimize the real suffering or defend the government. I wish to do neither. I harbor no illusions about the regime's motives, and I can only imagine the

anguish of those living under daily bombardment, trying to care for the wounded while wondering if and when they will join the many who have already died.

But the recent situation in Eastern Ghouta is unfortunately not as unique as recent media accounts suggest. Just last month, the respected, independent monitoring group Airwars reminded us that U.S.-led Coalition air strikes on the Syrian city of Raqqa created many more victims with the same destructive tactics of “siege, bomb and evacuate.”

In just one incident in March 2017, Coalition bombers killed as many as 400 civilians at a school near Raqqa, where hundreds of women and children were taking shelter from the war.

“By the time Raqqa was liberated on October 20th,” Airwars estimated, “more than 1,450 civilians had likely been killed by the Coalition since the start of June. Other monitors said that at least 1,800 civilians died in the fighting. Defeat of [the] so-called Islamic State had come at an extraordinary cost, with the UN reporting that 80% of the city was left uninhabitable – despite the Coalition’s continued insistence that it had been ‘waging the most precise war in history.’”

UN and human rights workers, to their credit, decried the civilian casualties, but U.S. military commanders systematically downplayed them as exaggerated or “hyperbolic.” The Coalition bombing generated only limited concern in the West because of its worthy goal: liberating Raqqa from the grip of ISIS. (In the end, the BBC reported, hundreds of ISIS members were allowed to quietly escape the city unscathed as part of a secret deal with the Coalition.)

Yet when it comes to evaluating the morality (or lack thereof) of the Syrian government’s bombing of Eastern Ghouta, precious few news stories remind readers that most of the generically described “rebels” in that suburb are members of Islamist extremist groups, including at least one al-Qaeda affiliate. No reasonable government in Damascus would want them on its doorstep.

The regional director of the International Red Cross observed further that rebel forces were blasting Damascus with mortar shells, noting that “maybe this is a reality that is not really reported.”

Comparing the killing in Eastern Ghouta to such notorious events as the Srebrenica massacre is a not-so-subtle way of calling for further foreign military intervention against the Syrian regime in the name of humanitarian principles – precisely what has helped cause such prolonged war and devastation in the first place.

Anyone genuinely concerned with saving lives should, instead, urge rebel groups

to join in United Nations-sponsored peace talks in Geneva, rather than boycotting them. Above all, they should ponder the words of *Washington Post* columnist David Ignatius following his recent return from viewing the unimaginable devastation in Raqqa:

“Raqqa is a warning to be careful about destroying the ruling order, anywhere, without knowing what will come next. Russian President Vladimir Putin keeps making this point – the United States was reckless to encourage the overthrow of authority in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Libya without better planning for the “day after” – and he’s probably right. Too often, the vacuums have been filled by warlords, foreign mercenaries and death cults.”

“The United States and its allies nearly destroyed Raqqa to rescue it from a caliphate that governed by torture,” he concluded. “It was a just war, but we should try hard to avoid having to fight one like it again.”

Jonathan Marshall is the author or co-author of five books on U.S. foreign relations and international affairs. His many articles on Syria include “Hidden Origins of Syria’s Civil War,” “Death of the Syrian ‘Moderate’ Fantasy,” and “How The New Yorker Mis-Reports Syria.”

Syria’s White Helmets Go Global

Syria’s White Helmets have been boosted by the West as a trusted humanitarian organization, but their origins and motives remain murky. Now, the White Helmets effort appears to be spreading to other countries, Caitlin Johnstone notes.

By Caitlin Johnstone

I sat down with my coffee this beautiful Australian morning to watch two of my favorite independent media figures jam together in a Corbett Report interview of renowned independent investigative journalist Vanessa Beeley. About two-thirds of the way through, I nearly fell out of my chair.

At 24:30 of the clip, the following bone-chilling conversation takes place about the nature of the establishment media’s aggressive protection of the highly publicized “Syrian Civil Defense,” also known as the White Helmets.

Beeley: But I think what is interesting, why is this organization being protected to such an extent? I think it’s because the imperialist apparatus is defending the concept. We’ve already seen [White Helmets founder] James Le

Mesurier recruiting in Brazil. We know that the White Helmets have appeared in Malaysia and in Venezuela, and in the Philippines. So you know, because this went through my head so many times, these are only 3,000 criminals and thugs that have emerged from the terrorist ranks or the “Free Syrian Army” [air quotes] moderate extremist ranks to become the White Helmets in order to continue to get paid doing the same job but under a different auspice.

Why are they being so heavily protected? But I think it’s more to do with the concept. It’s more to do with the importance of this concept going forward. As James Le Mesurier said very recently, who would you trust more than the fire brigade or a first response NGO? There you have it. That’s the key to why this group is so important.

James Corbett: It is the perfect cover. And it certainly is a template that I’m sure will be used over and over in these types of situations if they can get away with it. So, extremely important.

Extremely important indeed. The White Helmets are a war propaganda firm with extensive ties to both lucrative western financial backing and known terrorist factions, and the notion of this organization branching out into other potential targets of the U.S.-centralized war machine is absolutely horrifying.

We already see the White Helmets cited constantly by Western mass media in every allegation against the government of Bashar al- Assad, as in this article courtesy of Associated Press and the *Washington Post* using the “Syrian Civil Defense” as their source for a report on an alleged chemical weapons attack in the Idlib province, referring to them in the header as “Syrian activists.”

The mainstream media promotes everything this organization says as fact and does everything they can to protect and promote the White Helmets’ reputation, meaning that if they spread throughout the world, war propaganda can be manufactured from the inside against any government the empire wishes to target with its armies of extremist “freedom fighters.”

In response to this jarring new information I reached out to Vanessa Beeley to make sure I was understanding this properly, and she provided the following statement:

The White Helmets franchise is a terrifying extension of soft power infiltration deep inside target nations, exploiting trust, vulnerability and poverty with the “First Responder” construct that “everyone trusts” as James Le Mesurier so clearly stated in a recent interview in Brazil. This pseudo

Humanitarian, NATO state-sanctioned fist will be used to crush many more nations in the future if it is not stopped in Syria. Just as Syria has contained the terrorist fire within its borders, so has it exposed the White Helmets as the terrorist alter ego, but for how long will both be contained? Terrorism is fanning out into Europe via the EU funded Turkish exit routes, the White Helmets are also establishing themselves further afield, in Venezuela, Malaysia, the Philippines to name a few. Terrorism and the White Helmets march in lock-step and can only be stopped by confronting the cancerous cultures in which they are cultivated?—US Necolonialism, British Imperialism, EU Globalism, Gulf State Extremism & Israeli Parasitism.

Ouch. Okay. I was really hoping I'd misunderstood.

I cannot overemphasize how dangerous this is. The West is already saturated in deceitful war propaganda about Syria, as shown irrefutably in cases like [the Bana Alabed CNN interview](#) and [the BBC's Saving Syria's Children footage](#), and this has largely been made possible by the mass media's collaboration with the White Helmets.

Putting them in places like Venezuela, a [regular target of imperialist manipulations with the largest oil reserves in in the world](#), or the Philippines, a major longtime U.S. military asset where a Duterte pivot away from Washington toward Beijing [could get very ugly](#), would give the US war machine the ability to legitimize any allegation against those governments if it decides it's time for aggressive regime change. The organization's [own website](#) (archived [here](#) in case they change it) asserts that it is "currently assessing opportunities for implementation of Civil Defence-based stabilisation programmes in other countries in the Middle East, including Yemen and Iraq."

Yesterday *The Guardian*, which has surely become the overall most aggressive promoter of Western war propaganda on the planet, [ran an article](#) titled (I swear I am not making this up) "'Russia wants to hack the Oscars': smear campaign targets Syrian nominee." It was authored by Olivia Solon, the same *Guardian* writer who, without ever having been to Syria or having any Middle East reporting experience whatsoever, wrote an [extremely deceptive smear piece](#) on Beeley and other reporters who've been contradicting the establishment narrative about the White Helmets. The new article alleges that Russia is running a conspiratorial campaign to prevent [yet another pro-White Helmets documentary](#) from receiving yet another Academy Award.

Beeley picks apart this new film "The Last Men In Aleppo" and the ongoing trend of establishment media elevating such documentaries [in this excellent article here](#), so there's no need for me to get into why Olivia Solon's latest war

propaganda piece is just as ridiculous as her first, but it's important to note how ferociously these establishment outlets are protecting the White Helmets. How weird is that? Where else do you see war zone search and rescue teams being made into glamorous media superstars with cute matching uniforms? Who are aggressively protected from counter-narratives by stalwart establishment outlets?

James Le Mesurier is a British private security specialist and a former British military intelligence officer. He knows how to construct a psy-op. He's trying to franchise his war propaganda firm worldwide, where it will be used to manufacture pro-regime change narratives and will be aggressively defended and promoted by the establishment media, and its allegations against disobedient governments and factions will be reported as fact by western newscasters and pundits.

It's a brilliant scheme, and it may become the future of war propaganda if we can't shed enough light on it in time.

Caitlin Johnstone is a rogue journalist, poet, and utopia prepper who publishes regularly at Medium. Follow her work on Facebook, Twitter, or her website. She has a podcast and a new book *Woke: A Field Guide for Utopia Preppers*.

WMD Claims in Syria Raise Concerns over U.S. Escalation

Following a well-established script, anonymous U.S. officials are making unsubstantiated claims about weapons of mass destruction – this time in Syria – while the media fails to ask tough questions, reports Rick Sterling.

By Rick Sterling

It's the WMD story all over again.

Not unlike the spurious claims that paved the way to war with Iraq 15 years ago, anonymous "U.S. officials" are once again accusing a targeted "regime" of using "weapons of mass destruction" and issuing threats that the U.S. military may have to "hold it accountable." Once again, Western media is broadcasting these accusations and threats without skepticism or investigation.

The Washington Post story is titled "Trump administration: Syria probably continuing to make, use chemical weapons." The Reuters story, which was carried

by the *New York Times*, says, "U.S. officials have said the Syrian government may be developing new types of chemical weapons, and President Donald Trump is prepared to consider further military action. President Bashar al Assad is believed to have secretly kept part of Syria's chemical weapons stockpile."

Jerusalem Online says, "A U.S. official says Syrian President Assad's forces may be developing new types of chemical weapons, which could reach as far as the U.S." *Jane's Defence Weekly* quotes a U.S. official saying, "They clearly think they can get away with this."

The accusations follow a long-established pattern of officials making anonymous claims and then ratcheting up tensions and issuing calls for retaliatory action – while the media repeats the claims without the slightest amount of skepticism. The Washington Post article, for example, includes the following statement by an anonymous official: "If the international community does not take action now ... we will see more chemical weapons use, not just by Syria but by non-state actors such as ISIS and beyond. And that use will spread to U.S. shores."

Yet, based on a review of recent history, there is plenty of reason to believe that the story is false and is being broadcast to deceive the public in preparation for new military aggression.

The invasion of Vietnam with over 500,000 U.S. soldiers was preceded by the phony Gulf of Tonkin incident where a U.S. ship was supposedly attacked by a North Vietnamese vessel. It wasn't true and President Lyndon Johnson knew it. The resolution was passed unanimously (416-0) in the House and only Wayne Morse and Ernest Gruening had the integrity and insight to oppose it in the Senate. Was anyone ever held accountable for the lie that led to the deaths of more than 58,000 U.S. soldiers and millions of Vietnamese? No.

The 1991 attack on Iraq and subsequent massacre of Iraqi soldiers and civilians was preceded by the fabricated testimony of the Kuwaiti Ambassador's daughter pretending to be a nurse who had witnessed Iraqi soldiers stealing incubators and leaving Kuwaiti babies on the floor. Were the marketing officials Hill & Knowlton and politicians such as Tom Lantos who managed this deceit ever held accountable? No.

In 2003 the U.S. launched the invasion of Iraq leading to the deaths of over a million Iraqis based on the false and fabricated evidence provided by the CIA and uncritically promoted by the mainstream media. For example, Michael Gordon and Thomas Friedman promoted and lauded the invasion at the *New York Times*. Were they held to account? No, they carry right on to today.

In 2011 the U.S. led NATO attacks on Libya with the stated purpose of

“protecting civilians” from a possible massacre. This was explained and encouraged by journalists and pundits such as Nicholas Kristof and Juan Cole. NATO officials bragged about their operation. After the brief Western euphoria, it became clear that the campaign was based on lies and the real result was an explosion of extremism, massacres and chaos which continues to today. Accountability? None. One rarely hears about Libya today. Out of sight, out of mind.

In August 2013 we heard about a massive sarin gas attack on the outskirts of Damascus. Human Rights Watch and others promoting a Western attack quickly accused the Syrian government. They asserted that Assad had crossed Obama’s “red line” and the U.S. needed to intervene directly. Subsequent investigations revealed the gas attack was not carried out by the Syrian government. It was more likely to have been perpetrated by a Turkish supported terrorist faction with the goal of pressuring the Obama administration to directly attack Syria. Two Turkish parliamentarians presented evidence of Turkey’s involvement in the transfer of sarin.

Some of the best U.S. investigative journalists, including the late Robert Parry and Seymour Hersh, researched the issue and uncovered evidence pointing to Turkish-supported “rebels” not Syria. Despite the factual evidence exposing the “junk heap” of false claims, mainstream media and their followers continue to assert that Assad committed the crime.

In April 2017 it was the same thing: U.S. and allies made accusations which were never proven and ultimately discredited. The UN’s team of investigators from the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons never visited the scene of the crime. They discovered the curious fact that dozens of victims in multiple locations showed up at hospitals with symptoms of chemical injuries before the attack happened. This is strong evidence of fraud but that line of investigation was not pursued.

With or without awareness of the deceit, Trump ordered missile strikes on a Syrian air base which killed 13 people including four children. Accountability? None.

Now, despite their earlier failures to investigate properly, anonymous officials at the OPCW are reviving the story of the Syrian chemical attacks with claims that laboratory tests have linked the Syrian government’s chemical weapon stockpile to those attacks, supporting Western assertions that Assad was behind the atrocity.

Taken together, these recent developments indicate that forces in the U.S. government intend to continue trying to destroy Syria. Despite contradictory

claims by the Trump administration, a core fact is that the U.S. is training and supplying a sectarian military militia inside northern Syria against the wishes of the Syrian government. The U.S. previously said they were in Syria to get rid of ISIS but now that ISIS is largely gone, the U.S. military says it is not leaving. On the contrary, the U.S. military helped escort ISIS fighters from Raqqa to al Bukamal and the U.S. is now training ISIS fighters to be reincarnated as yet another anti-Assad “rebel” force.

Regarding the latest accusations, the following is noteworthy:

- Secretary of Defense Mattis acknowledges they do not have independent evidence.
- The accusations come from “NGOs, fighters on the ground,” according to Mattis. In other words, the accusations come from the armed opposition and “White Helmets”.
- In contrast with their media image, the “White Helmets” are neither independent nor neutral. The organization is a creation of the U.S. and U.K. governments and Western military contractors. It’s a well-funded and highly successful deception. The U.S. and U.K. train, supply and pay “volunteers” to provide them with accusations that can then be used to justify the desired aggression.

Behind the scenes, anonymous “U.S. officials” are feeding the media evidence-free claims that the Syrian government is rebuilding a chemical weapons program and “developing new munitions to deliver chemical weapons.” They claim the program is “evolving” and using a mix of sarin and chlorine.

Finally, there is the issue of timing. It is a curious fact that each time there are scheduled negotiations involving the Syrian government and opposition, there is an outburst of atrocity claims. This time the accusations come at the same time as the Syrian National Dialogue in Sochi, Russia. An objective investigation would consider who benefits from actions which distract from or sabotage negotiations. In February 2014 when Geneva negotiations were undermined by sensational claims of photos showing torture in Syria, the *Christian Science Monitor* broke ranks with mainstream media by suggesting it was a “well timed propaganda exercise.”

Journalists are supposed to critically question, investigate the facts, and expose contradictions and falsehoods. When the media fails to do that, they have some responsibility, especially when it leads to wars, death and destruction. As indicated above, there are many horrible and bloody examples of mainstream media failure. There should be some accountability. When is that going to happen?

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Decline of Western Ethnic States

The neocon-driven wars in the Middle East have unleashed a demographic tidal wave on Europe, the arrival of refugees from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and other war-torn countries. Despite political resistance, this flood inevitably will reshape the Continent's ethnic character, says Lawrence Davidson.

By Lawrence Davidson

If you were transported back to Europe in 1900 and asked educated citizens to describe the ideal political arrangement, what they would outline to you is a homogeneous nation-state: France for the French, Germany for the Germans, Italy for the Italians, and the like. They would note exceptions, but describe them as unstable.

For instance, at this time the Austro-Hungarian Empire was, ethnically, a very diverse place, but it was politically restless. Come World War I, ethnic desires for self-rule and independence would help tear this European-centered multinational empire apart. In truth, even those states that fancied themselves ethnically unified were made up of many regional outlooks and dialects, but the friction these caused was usually minor enough to allow the ideal of homogeneity to prevail. The ethnically unified nation-state was almost everyone's "ideal state."

This standard of homogeneity started to break down after World War II. After this war, the foreign empires run by many of Europe's homogeneous states were in retreat and in their wake came a slew of new nations in Africa, Asia and the Middle East. Simultaneously, the impact of the end of empire on the European nations was to have their own homogeneous status eroded.

For instance, when Great Britain set up the Commonwealth as a substitute for empire she allowed freer immigration into England for Commonwealth citizens. The result was an influx of people of color from former British colonies in Africa, India-Pakistan and the Caribbean.

A similar thing happened as the French empire crumbled. With its demise many North Africans, as well as Vietnamese Catholics, went to France. Later, Turks would go to Germany, a preference that reflected the close relations between Berlin and the defunct Ottoman Empire.

Then came the formation of the European Union (EU) in 1993, which facilitated the flow of labor across European borders. Now citizens of one EU state could go and work in any other member state. In other words, the 20 or 30 years following World War II marked the beginning of the end of the Western homogeneous state.

The Refugee Crisis

Now we may be witnessing the final stage of that demise. The present refugee crisis resulting from wars raging in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Yemen and Libya, among other places in the Middle East, has set in movement millions of displaced people. Many of these refugees are heading for Europe.

While initially most of the European Union leaders showed some willingness to take in substantial numbers of refugees, strong resistance from Hungary, Romania, Slovakia and the Czech Republic caused a pause in the effort. This was a predictable moment. All established populations, even relatively diverse ones, fear that their cultural norms and economic advantages will be threatened by large waves of new immigrants.

At the extreme, one finds ideologically and religiously defined nations such as the Arab Gulf states and the allegedly Westernized Israel (itself a product of an overwhelming refugee invasion of Palestine) refusing to take in any of the present refugees. Even in a country such as the United States, which is historically built upon the inflow of diverse populations, it is politically difficult to open borders to new refugees in need. Initially, announcing a willingness to allow an embarrassingly small number of 10,000 refugees to enter, Washington has increased that to 100,000 between now and 2017.

Getting back to the European scene, the pressures now building on the borders eventually resulted in a EU decision, allegedly binding on all its 28 member states, to speed up the intake screening process for refugees and distribute the accepted numbers across the EU countries. How many will ultimately be allowed into Europe is still unclear.

If the leaders of Europe are smart about it they will go beyond merely symbolic numbers. If they are not, then there will be concentration camps on their borders and eventual violence that will mark a dark period in their supposed civilized histories. Controlled or not, in the end, many of the refugees will probably find a way in.

Ironic Justice

There is ironic justice in this prospect. After all, the wars that have uprooted so many were triggered by Western intervention in the Middle East. One can thank George W. Bush and his neoconservative colleagues (along with British allies)

for the 2003 invasion of Iraq. That action set loose the forces that have subsequently displaced the people who make up the bulk of today's refugees.

To this can be added the 2011 NATO intervention in the civil war in Libya, in which France, Italy and the U.S. led the way. This action has prolonged the anarchy in that country and is one of the reasons that 300,000 people attempted to cross the Mediterranean Sea in the direction of Europe in 2015 alone. At least 2,500 of them died in the attempt.

It is a testimony to the fact that the average citizen has little knowledge and less interest in their nation's foreign policies that few in Europe and the U.S. recognize, much less acknowledge, responsibility for the present disaster.

The population in western and central Europe has been shifting in the direction of diversity for the last 70 years, and that of the United States more or less consistently since the nation's founding. Along with diversity comes a complementary, if perhaps more gradual, shift in culture.

Opposing this historical trend is the fact that anti-immigrant resistance among established national populations is almost a default position. However, this is like spitting in the wind. In the long term, the evolution of populations moves from homogeneity to diversity. It is just a matter of how long the process takes.

Thus, from every angle, ethical as well as historical, the way to approach the present refugee crisis is to allow, in a controlled but adequately responsive way, the inflow of those now running from the ravages of invasion and civil war.

In so doing we should accept the demise of the homogeneous state. Whether it is Germany, France, Hungary, Israel or Burma, the concept is historically untenable and neither raises nor even maintains our civilizational standards. Rather it grinds them down into the dust of an inhumane xenophobia.

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